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DIAGNOSIS OF THE ENGLISHMAN

BY JOHN GALSWORTHY

AFTER nine months of war, search for the cause thereof borders on the academic. Comment on the physical facts of the situation does not come within the scope of one who by disposition and training is concerned with states of mind. Speculation on what the future may bring forth may be left to those with an aptitude for prophecy.

But there is one thought which rises supreme at this particular moment of these tremendous times: the period of surprise is over; the forces known; the issue fully joined. It is now a case of "Pull devil, pull baker!" and a question of the fiber of the combatants. For this reason I think it not amiss to try and present to any whom it may concern as detached a picture as I can of the real nature of that combatant who is called the Englishman, especially since ignorance in central Europe of his character was the chief cause of this war, and speculation as to the future is useless without right comprehension of this curious creature.

For this task I claim the credentials of one who, having no drop of any but English blood, has for many years observed, criticized, and satirized himself and his compatriots. I take the Englishman advisedly, because he represents four-fifths of the population of the British Isles, and eight-ninths of the character and sentiment therein.

And first let me say that there is no more deceptive, unconsciously deceptive person, on the face of the globe. The Englishman certainly does not know himself; and outside England he is but guessed at. Only a pure Englishman—and he must be an odd one—really knows the Englishman; just as, for inspired judgment of art, one must go to the inspired artist.

Racially the Englishman is so complex and so old a blend that no one can say what he is. In character he is just as com-

plex. Physically there are two main types: one inclining to length of limb, narrowness of face and head (you will see nowhere such long and narrow heads as in our islands), and bony jaws; the other approximating more to the ordinary "John Bull." The first type is gaining on the second. There is little or no difference in the main character behind them.

In attempting to understand the real nature of the Englishman certain salient facts must be borne in mind.

To be surrounded generation after generation by the sea has developed in him a suppressed idealism, a peculiar impermeability, a turn for adventure, a faculty for wandering, and for being sufficient unto himself in far surroundings.

Whoso weathers for centuries a climate that, though healthy and never extreme, is perhaps the least reliable and one of the wettest in the world, must needs grow in himself a counter-balance of dry philosophy, a defiant humor, an enforced medium temperature of soul. The Englishman is no more given to extremes than is his climate; against its damp and perpetual changes he has become coated with a sort of bluntness.

This is by far the oldest settled Western Power, politically speaking. For eight hundred and fifty years England has known no serious military disturbance from without; for over two hundred she has known no military disturbance and no serious political turmoil within. This is partly the outcome of her isolation, partly the happy accident of her political constitution, partly the result of the Englishman's habit of looking before he leaps, which comes, no doubt, from the mixture in his blood and the mixture in his climate.

Taken in conjunction with centuries of political stability, the great preponderance for several generations of town over country life is the main cause of a certain deeply ingrained humaneness, of which, speaking generally, the Englishman appears to be rather ashamed than otherwise.

That the public schools are a potent element in the formation of the modern Englishman, not only of the upper, but of all classes, is something that one rather despairs of making understood—in countries that have no similar institution. But: imagine one hundred thousand youths of the wealthiest, healthiest, and most influential classes passed, during each generation, at the most impressionable age, into a sort of ethical mold; emerging therefrom stamped to the core with the impress of a uniform morality, uniform manners, uniform way of looking at life; remembering always that these youths fill seven-eighths of

the important positions in the professional administration of their country and the conduct of its commercial enterprise; remembering, too, that through perpetual contact with every other class their standard of morality and way of looking at life filter down into the very toes of the land. This great character-forming machine is remarkable for an unself-consciousness which gives it enormous strength and elasticity. Not inspired by the State, it inspires the State. The characteristics of the philosophy it enjoins are mainly negative and, for that, the stronger. "Never show your feelings—to do so is not manly and bores your fellows. Don't cry out when you're hurt, making yourself a nuisance to other people. Tell no tales about your companions, and no lies about yourself. Avoid all 'swank,' 'side,' 'swagger,' braggadocio of speech or manner, on pain of being laughed at." (This maxim is carried to such a pitch that the Englishman, except in his press, habitually understates everything.) "Think little of money, and speak less of it. Play games hard, and keep the rules of them even when your blood is hot and you are tempted to disregard them." In three words: "*play the game*"—a little phrase which may be taken as the characteristic understatement of the modern Englishman's creed of honor in all classes. This great unconscious machine has considerable defects. It tends to the formation of "caste"; it is a poor teacher of sheer learning, and, æsthetically, with its universal suppression of all interesting and queer individual traits of personality—it is almost horrid. But it imparts a remarkable incorruptibility to English life; it conserves vitality by suppressing all extremes; and it implants everywhere a kind of unassuming stoicism and respect for the rules of the great game—Life. Through its unconscious example, and through its cult of games, it has vastly influenced even the classes not directly under its control.

Three more main facts must be borne in mind:

The essential democracy of the Government.

Freedom of speech and the press.

Absence of compulsory military service.

These, the outcome of the quiet and stable home life of an island people, have done more than anything to make the Englishman a deceptive personality to the outside eye. He has for centuries been permitted to grumble. There is no such confirmed grumbler—until he really has something to grumble at, and then no one who grumbles less. There is no such confirmed carper at the condition of his country, yet no one really so

profoundly convinced of its perfection. A stranger might well think, from his utterances, that he was spoiled by the freedom of his life, unprepared to sacrifice anything for a land in such a condition. Threaten that country, and with it his liberty, and you will find that his grumbles have meant less than nothing. You will find, too, that behind the apparent slackness of every arrangement and every individual are powers of adaptability to facts, elasticity, practical genius, a latent spirit of competition, and a determination that are staggering. Before this war began it was the fashion among a number of English to lament the decadence of the race. These very grumblers are now foremost in praising, and quite rightly, the spirit shown in every part of their country. Their lamentations, which plentifully deceived the outside ear, were just English grumbles, for if in truth England had been decadent, there could have been no such universal display for them to be praising now. But all this democratic grumbling and habit of "going as you please" serve a deep purpose. Autocracy, censorship, compulsion, destroy humor in a nation's blood and elasticity in its fiber; they cut at the very mainsprings of national vitality. Only free from these baneful controls can each man arrive in his own way at realization of what is or is not national necessity; only free from them will each man truly identify himself with a national ideal—not through deliberate instruction or by command of others, but by simple, natural conviction from within.

I enter here two cautions to the stranger trying to form an estimate of the Englishman: the creature must not be judged from his press, which, manned (with certain exceptions) by those who are not typically English, is too highly colored altogether to illustrate the true English spirit; nor can he be judged by such of his literature as is best known on the Continent. The Englishman proper is inexpressive, unexpressed. Further, he must not be judged by the evidences of his wealth. England may be the richest country in the world per head of population, but not five per cent. of that population have any wealth to speak of, certainly not enough to have affected their hardihood; and, with inconsiderable exceptions, those who have enough are brought up to worship hardihood. For the vast proportion of young Englishmen active military service is merely a change from work as hard and more monotonous.

From these main premises, then, we come to what the Englishman really is.

When, after months of travel, one returns to England, one

can taste, smell, feel the difference in the atmosphere, physical and moral—the curious, damp, blunt, good-humored, happy-go-lucky, old-established, slow-seeming formlessness of everything. You hail a porter, you tell him you have plenty of time—he muddles your things amiably with an air of, “It’ll be all right,” till you have only just time. But suppose you tell him you have no time—he will set himself to catch that train for you, and he will catch it faster than a porter of any other country. Let no stranger, however, experiment to prove the truth of this, for that porter—and a porter is very like any other Englishman—is incapable of taking the foreigner seriously; and, quite friendly, but a little pitying, will lose him the train, assuring the unfortunate gentleman that he really doesn’t know what train he wants to catch—how should he? Forgive us, gentle strangers, we are islanders and know no better.

The Englishman must have a thing brought under his nose before he will act; bring it there and he will go on acting after everybody else has stopped. He lives very much in the moment because he is essentially a man of facts and not a man of imagination. Want of imagination makes him, philosophically speaking, rather ludicrous; in practical affairs it handicaps him at the start; but once he has “got going,” as we say, it is of incalculable assistance to his stamina. The Englishman, partly through this lack of imagination and nervous sensibility, partly through his inbred dislike of extremes, and habit of minimizing the expression of everything, is a perfect example of the conservation of energy. It is very difficult to come to the end of him. Add to this unimaginative, practical, tenacious moderation, an inherent spirit of competition—not to say pugnacity—so strong that it will often show through the coating of his “live-and-let-live,” half-surly, half-good-humored manner; add a peculiar, ironic, “don’t-care” sort of humor, an underground but inveterate humaneness and an ashamed idealism, and you get some notion of the pudding of English character. Its main feature is a kind of terrible coolness, a rather awful level-headedness. The Englishman makes constant small blunders, but few, almost no, deep mistakes. He is a slow starter, but there is no stronger finisher, because he has by temperament and training the faculty of getting through any job that he gives his mind to with a minimum expenditure of vital energy; nothing is wasted in expression, style, spread-eagleism; everything is instinctively kept as near to the practical heart of the matter as possible. He is—to the eye of an artist—distressingly matter-of-fact, a tempting mark

for satire. And yet he is in truth an idealist, though it is his nature to snub, disguise, and mock his own inherent optimism. To admit enthusiasms is "bad form" if he is a "gentleman"; and "swank" or mere waste of good heat if he is not a "gentleman." England produces more than its proper percentage of cranks and poets, and, I take it, this is nature's way of redressing the balance in a country where feelings are not shown, sentiments not expressed, and extremes laughed at. Not that the Englishman lacks heart; he is not cold, as is generally supposed; on the contrary, he is warm-hearted and feels very strongly; but just as peasants, for lack of words to express their feelings, become stolid, so it is with the Englishman, from sheer lack of the habit of self-expression. Nor is the Englishman deliberately hypocritical; but his tenacity, combined with his powerlessness to express his feelings, often gives him the appearance of a Pharisee. He is inarticulate; has not the clear and fluent cynicism of expansive natures wherewith to confess exactly how he stands. It is the habit of men of all nations to want to have things both ways; the Englishman is, unfortunately, so unable to express himself *even to himself* that he has never realized this, much less confessed it—hence his appearance of hypocrisy.

He is quite wrongly credited with being attached to money. His island position, his early discoveries of coal, iron, and processes of manufacture, have made him, of course, into a confirmed industrialist and trader, but he is always an adventurer in wealth rather than a heaper-up of it. He is far from sitting on his money-bags—has absolutely no vein of proper avarice; and for national ends will spill out his money like water when he is convinced of the necessity.

In everything, it comes to that with the Englishman: he must be convinced; and he takes a lot of convincing. He absorbs ideas slowly, reluctantly; he would rather not imagine anything unless he is obliged; but in proportion to the slowness with which he can be moved is the slowness with which he can be removed! Hence the symbol of the bulldog. When he does see and seize a thing he seizes it with the whole of his weight and wastes no breath in telling you that he has got hold. That is why his press is so untypical; it gives the impression that he does waste breath. And while he has hold he gets in more mischief in a shorter time than any other dog, because of his capacity for concentrating on the present, without speculating on the past or future.

For the particular situation which the Englishman has now to

face he is terribly well adapted. Because he has so little imagination, so little power of expression, he is saving nerve all the time. Because he never goes to extremes, he is saving energy of body and spirit. That the men of all nations are about equally endowed with courage and self-sacrifice has been proved in these last six months; it is to other qualities that one must look for final victory in a war of exhaustion. The Englishman does not look into himself; he does not brood; he sees no further forward than is necessary; and he must have his joke. These are fearful and wonderful advantages. Examine the letters and diaries of the various combatants and you will see how far less imaginative and reflecting (though shrewd, practical, and humorous) the English are than any others; you will gain, too, a profound, a deadly conviction that behind them is a fiber like rubber that may be frayed and bent a little this way and that, but can neither be permeated nor broken.

When this war began the Englishman rubbed his eyes steeped in peace; he is still rubbing them just a little, but less and less every day. A profound lover of peace by habit and tradition, he has actually realized by now that he is in for it up to the neck. To any one who really knows him—*c'est quelque chose!*

I freely confess that from an æsthetic point of view the Englishman, devoid of high lights and shadows, coated with drab, and superhumanly steady on his feet, is not too attractive. But for the wearing, tearing, slow, and dreadful business of this war, the Englishman—fighting of his own free will, unimaginative, humorous, competitive, practical, never in extremes, a dumb, inveterate optimist, and terribly tenacious—is equipped with Victory.

JOHN GALSWORTHY.